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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 002368

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/11/2008

TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM TU OSCE

SUBJECT: TURKISH PARLIAMENT'S HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE: ILL

INFORMED AND SO FAR INEFFECTIVE

REF: A. ANKARA 2353

1B. ANKARA 1423

Classified by Polcouns John Kunstadter; reasons 1.5 b and d.

¶1. (C) Summary: The parliamentary Human Rights Committee does not play a significant role in the development of reform legislation, and the public comments of its Chairman to date have focused on supposed human rights violations outside Turkey. Committee members are generally not well informed on Turkish human rights issues and lack specific ideas for promoting reform. Some hold extreme Islamist and anti-American/xenophobic views. End Summary.

¶2. (C) The GOT over the past couple of years has adopted several extensive, bold packages of human rights reform legislation as part of its drive for EU membership. The ruling AK Party has continued this effort since coming to power in the November elections. However, the parliamentary Human Rights Committee plays virtually no role in this process. Our meetings with 13 of 25 Committee members indicate that the Committee is ill-prepared to promote human rights in Turkey. Here's why:

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Turkish Parliamentarians Are Not Lawmakers  
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¶3. (C) The Committee played virtually no role in drafting or revising any of the human rights reform packages adopted by Parliament over the past two years. The drafts were prepared by MFA officials in consultation with other ministries, particularly the Justice and Interior ministries. The parliamentary Constitutional and Justice committees made some revisions to the drafts, but Human Rights Committee members acknowledge they did not. Turkish MPs have the right to introduce legislation, but traditionally the bureaucracy drafts most bills. Human Rights Committee members do not appear to have any knowledge of or interest in the legislative process; none of the members with whom we spoke has plans to introduce legislation.

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Ineffective Leadership  
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¶4. (C) While the Committee's lack of influence over legislation is nothing new, the Committee has in the past served as an effective soap box for promoting human rights reform. In 2000, Committee Chairwoman Sema Piskinsut released a series of highly critical reports documenting torture in prisons and detention centers throughout Turkey. Prosecutors sought to have her parliamentary immunity removed in order to prosecute her for refusing to release the names of her sources. However, current Chairman Mehmet Elkamis has so far focused on calling attention to supposed human rights problems outside Turkey. In his comments to the press, Elkamis has:

-- Accused the U.S. and UK of committing "savagery" and a "massacre" in Iraq and suggested leaders of the two countries could be tried on war crimes (reftel A).

-- Criticized the treatment of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay.

-- Promised to investigate allegations of unspecified ill treatment of a Turkish prisoner in Sweden. (Note: A Swedish diplomat told us the GOT has not responded to Sweden's offer

to transfer him to a Turkish prison. End Note.)

-- Promised to investigate allegations in the Turkish press that the German Government is conducting medical experiments on Turkish prisoners. (Note: German diplomats say these allegations appear to be fueled by recent suicides among Turkish prisoners in Germany, as well as the fact that asylum seekers in Germany are required to take a medical exam. One Committee member told us there were "rumors" that the USG was using Guantanamo Bay prisoners for medical experiments. End note.)

15. (C) We have not seen Elkatmis make public statements calling attention to human rights abuses in Turkey. Elkatmis denied to us that he is focusing on problems outside Turkey, noting that the Committee recently visited southeastern Turkey and will soon release its report on conditions there. We have not yet seen the report, but Elkatmis told us it reflects his conclusion that it is now "impossible" to commit torture in detention centers because cameras have been installed.

16. (C) The Committee's two vice chairmen do not compensate for Elkatmis' shortcomings. Cavit Torun, an AK member, holds the most extreme Islamist and anti-Western views of the Committee members we've met to date. During our meeting, Torun accused the USG of supporting the PKK and launched an anti-American diatribe, deflecting all attempts to address human rights in Turkey. Mehmet Serif Ertugrul, of the opposition CHP party, is better informed, but offered no specific ideas about how the Committee should operate.

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No Focus or Sense of Mission  
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17. (C) Many members view the Committee as an NGO-like body whose role is to serve as the nation's moral conscience, rather than an element of the government responsible for making specific contributions to human rights reform in Turkey. Several averred to us that Committee members are not GOT representatives, but rather advocates of human rights worldwide. Some of the AK members are only capable of discussing human rights in broad Koranic terms addressing the need for brotherhood among men. They appear to have no interest in day-to-day human rights matters in Turkey -- one told us he had never heard of the highly publicized case against five German democracy foundations (Reftel B), while another was unaware of an incident involving police beating a protestor in Ankara on live TV.

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Fear of Outsiders  
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18. (C) Some of our Committee interlocutors display the most extreme symptoms of the classic Turkish fear of all things foreign. This is particularly problematic in the human rights field, where Turkey needs to engage the EU, U.S., and others in order to progress. Two Committee MPs told us they reject the Western human rights model, only to retreat when asked whether they support Turkey's EU candidacy (both said yes). Other views expressed by members include:

-- The Peace Corps volunteers who served in Turkey until the early 1970's wanted to learn about all elements of Turkish culture only in order to find weak points to exploit.

-- The U.S. turned PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan over to Turkey not for Turkey's benefit, but only to spare its allies Italy and Greece the embarrassment of having him on their hands.

-- The Western powers forced Turkey to spend money on the military during the Cold War in order to protect themselves and prevent Turkey from developing economically.

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Comment  
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19. (C) We will continue to engage Committee members in an effort to encourage a more constructive, focused approach to human rights issues.

